

# BEST ASIAN & ASIAN AMERICAN FILMS

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Creating a top-five list for anything is always hard, but doing it under the category of "Best Asian Films of All Time" is especially difficult. To begin, there's the issue of what constitutes "Asian Films" in the first place. Do the Asian films that have achieved popularity in the U.S. automatically hold more weight because they have a greater international following and arguably a bigger impact? Perhaps, but some of the most memorable films in Asian film history may not be Oscar-winning, or even have a director who is well-recognized overseas.

In addition, screening films with subtitles is always problematic, although inevitable, when it comes to judging the quality of foreign films – with Hong Kong films especially, much of the films' subtlety and grace is lost in laughably bad translations. Then there is the limitation of genre films – some beautiful films may be overlooked simply because they don't fit into a specific category and therefore never make it out of the country.

The following list is by no means comprehensive, nor is it meant to reflect the accomplishments of Asian cinema over the last five or so decades. For this task, a top-100 list would be inadequate, never mind a top-five. Rather, this list is meant to name a couple of Asian films that have been recognized, internationally as well as locally, as some of the best of their time.



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**Farewell My Concubine**  
dir. Chen Kaige, 1993

This ambitious historical picture follows the intriguing story of two opera singers who are torn apart by the arrival of the Cultural Revolution and the woman who comes between them (played seductively, as always, by Gong Li). *Farewell My Concubine* is one of the honorary films made during the Fifth Generation movement that first brought Chinese cinema international acclaim. Not only is it the only Chinese film to win the Palme d'Or prize at Cannes, but Leslie Cheung's heart-wrenching performance as a gay opium addict is enough reason to give the film a viewing.

**Oldboy**  
dir. Chan-wook Park, 2003

It turns out that the Japanese aren't the only ones who can cook up twisted plots and psychologically disturbed characters. With his background in philosophy and Hitchcock, Korean auteur Chan-wook

Park has fashioned a film that will stay with the viewer long after the credits have rolled and the psychopathic mastermind Woo-jee Yin (played by a sinister and smug Ji-Tae Yu) has had his final say. The second installment of Park's Vengeance trilogy, *Oldboy* centers on the desperate journey of Oh Dae-su (played brilliantly by Choi Min-sik), a man who is stripped of his family and freedom and imprisoned in a room for 15 years without explanation. When he finally escapes, the fireworks begin. While the images on the screen are no doubt disturbing, the graphic violence and sexual perversion underline a human revelation far more haunting than anything that accompanies it.

**Infernal Affairs**  
dir. Wai-Keung Lau and Alan Mak, 2002



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So popular that it spawned a North American remake by the great Martin Scorsese, *Infernal Affairs* was the original brainchild that inspired *The Departed*. Part of a trilogy, it tells the story of good cop, bad cop, sending its two protagonists, as well as the audience, on a frenzied maze run of betrayal and doubt. Taking place in Hong Kong's claustrophobic alleyways, this cat-and-mouse crime-thriller boasts stellar performances by Hong Kong superstars Andy Lau and Tony Leung Chiu Wai. Although the crime genre is not new for Hong Kong films, *Infernal Affairs* presents new twists at every turn, until we are no longer sure who the hero is and who is the villain.

**Princess Mononoke**  
dir. Hayao Miyazaki, 1997

It's a little cliché to have Miyazaki on a top-five list for anything movie-related, but a film this good can't be overlooked. Japan's favorite anime director tells a

morality tale about humanity versus the environment that isn't too preachy or overdone, nor is it a watered-down cartoon for children. On the contrary, everything in this film is delivered with a subtle beauty that leaves its viewers in awe, from the carefully crafted forest spirits to Joe Hisaishi's thoroughly memorable soundtrack. Miyazaki isn't just original; he invents worlds that rival the stuff of dreams. The settings are stunning, with original creatures (human, animal, and something in-between) and a forest cool enough to keep even the most jaded viewers engaged. Even the most minor of characters have rich back stories, and the epic battle scene at the end is something to see again and again.

**Seven Samurai**  
dir. Akira Kurosawa, 1954

Arguably Akira Kurosawa's most famous film, *Seven Samurai* was made in the 1950s, now known as the golden age in Japanese cinema history. Although a

black and white movie about a group of villagers being protected by samurai against ravaging bandits may not appeal to modern audiences today, the importance of *Seven Samurai's* impact on film should not be underestimated. It is often seen as the first action movie ever made, initiating many cinematic traditions that are still seen in similar films today (for one, take a look at the grand opening scene where the bandits are gathered atop the hill, ready to plunder the village below). The starkness of the black and white images contrast with the rich storytelling techniques that Kurosawa employs. More than 50 years later, *Seven Samurai* still remains a classic.

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While it's impossible to come up with a list of the five greatest Asian films, coming up with such a list for Asian-American films—in particular, films that have, interwoven within them, bits and pieces of Asian-American cultural heritage—is a considerably easier task. By no means is it trivial, however. Films like Mira Nair's *The Namesake*, Jessica Yu's *Ping Pong Playa*, and Wayne Wang's *Dim Sum: A Little Bit of Heart*, all get at what it means to be Asian and American, and they fall just short in this list only because of the numbers game.

What have I evaluated in formulating this list? I've considered impact. What did subsequent filmmakers and audiences take away from this film? What themes or techniques did it introduce that were incorporated by future filmmakers in their own work? I've considered longevity. Is it a film that people watch over and over again? Does it speak to audiences today as well as it did when it came out? I've considered artistic value. Does it have a coherent vision? Does it defy typical Hollywood conventions? I've considered cultural influence. Does it serve to represent our uniquely Asian American heritage? What comes to mind when we say "Asian American film?"

**Joy Luck Club**  
dir. Wayne Wang, 1993



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The story and characters are unforgettable, such as chess-playing prodigy Waverly Jong (Tamlyn Tomita) who openly upsets her protective mother and June Woo returns to China to see the lost daughters of her dead mother Suyuan. This film is full of material in direct conversation with our "Asian-American-ness," but one criticism may be that it's based on a book that tells most of the story. However, Wayne Wang's film manages to be one of the first films to address Asian American issues, and was certainly the first big-budget Hollywood vehicle to take Asian American culture seriously on the screen.

**Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon**  
dir. Ang Lee, 2000

Another famous film that comes immediately to mind is a primarily Taiwanese production directed by a prominent Asian American director. At the time, it was one of the most popular and influential martial arts films to hit the U.S. market, and it showed us why Chow Yun-Fat is such a star and Zhang Ziyi a rising gem. While the story gets carried away at times, the sentimental plot devices are balanced by moments of artistic greatness, such as the fight between Master Li Mu Bai and Jen Yu on top of the bamboo forest. Perhaps the most commercially successful film on this list, *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* won four Academy awards out of ten nominations, and was the film that brought the Chinese martial arts genre firmly into American consciousness.

**M. Butterfly**  
dir. David Cronenberg, 1993

The only film on this list directed by a non-Asian American director, this adaptation of a David Henry Hwang play addresses a theme frequently overlooked in American movies, and in particular, in Asian American cinema: alternative sexuality. While Jeremy Irons gives a strong performance as a French diplomat in love with an opera singer, Rene Gallimard, it is John Lone who gives a brilliant performance here. Lone defies the convention of portraying Asian men as the Charlie Chan type, i.e. as a service to society. He plays a conflicted transvestite with a questionable sexuality and complicated emotions, a representation much closer to the truth of what Asian Americans are. David Cronenberg is known for taking major risks with his films, and this one is no exception, featuring deceptive imagery, dramatic sexuality, and stark revelations, such as when Gallimard unmasks his 20-year lover with "You are nothing like my Butterfly." The reply: "Are you sure?"

**A Great Wall**  
dir. Peter Wang, 1986

The only undoubtedly comedic film on this list is the first great American film shot entirely in mainland China. The story cannot be any closer to what Asian Americans were going through in the '80s and '90s. Leo Fang, a computer programmer, goes home to China for the first time in 30 years to visit his relatives after quitting his job due to what he perceives as racial problems. That's the story. That's it. But it's the little things throughout the film that hits the emotional chords, and tells us why the divide between East and West is such a Great Wall. Wang's film is not a Hollywood film, many of which don't prioritize the portrayal of an Asian-American struggle to integrate into its native society. Wang wrote the screenplay and played the main lead, an almost Orson Wellesian effort for a Chinese-American filmmaker.

**Chan is Missing**  
dir. Wayne Wang, 1982

Perhaps an even more auteur-like effort is Wayne Wang's first feature film, which eerily parallels Orson Welles' classic *Citizen Kane*. Chinatown taxi driver Jo is searching for an ex-big-shot in China who was involved in a flag-waving incident and disappeared with \$4000. The Chan that he is searching for is (he thinks) a fresh-off-the-boat hardship-survivor from China who came to America to provide for his children. The mix of cultures is ingrained in this film, as the Virgin Mary stands in front of a Chinatown backdrop and Chinese pop plays over the American West landscape. Wang's film, more than any other on this list, shows us what it's like to live in a multi-cultural world, trying to juggle diverse heritages. Wang's first film is a tour de force feature touching on issues that Asian Americans continually grapple with and fail to understand. As Jo says, "What's not there seems to have just as much meaning as what is there." That, of course, is a Chinese saying.